OPINION

BY RAFIA ZAKARIA

Lost in translation

IT has been six months since Pakistan and India battled it out in the skies. Even though independent news sources have confirmed Pakistan's assertion that they downed a number of Indian aircraft, New Delhi carried out a disinformation campaign casting doubt on the facts. The Modi government's nationalist posture is centrally tied to the assertion of itself as a regional superpower, and towards this end it has spread disinformation.

The India-Pakistan rivalry is ultimately secondary to the bigger tensions between two very large superpowers. Anyone who has paid attention to the global recalibration taking place would know that the US is now focused on challenging China's surge on the world stage. Towards this end, the US interest in the region is tied not to any political narrative that the Modi government may want to peddle to its nationalism-fuelled support base but to the role that China is seen to be playing.

In accordance with this focus, the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission submitted a report to Congress this past week. The report is over 800 pages long, which shows the centrality of China to emerging US foreign policy. The report also considers the India-Pakistan conflict in May. Much to New Delhi's chagrin, the report refers to the Pahalgam attack as an "insurgent attack", which does not support Indian claims that it was linked to Pakistan.

The report acknowledges that "Pakistan's military success over India in its four-day clash showcased Chinese weaponry". This statement in a government report formally establishes what the Indian government understandably wishes to cover up.

Pakistan has always been open about its reliance on Chinese support to safeguard its sovereignty. Pakistan's close contact with the PLA was well known prior to Operation Sindoor. What is surprising is that the Modi government seemed to have been oblivious to this when it decided to carry out Operation Sindoor, despite observations on the issue by defence analysts in its own country.

Beyond these findings, the report also sheds light on how the US under President Donald Trump sees the new global order. As many might remember, as soon as Trump took office in January this year, he began to dismantle several government departments and programmes that had hitherto projected Washington's soft power. Prominent among these was USAID, sometimes described as the quasi-diplomatic arm of the State Department. Not only are USAID doors shut now, many of America's other investments in diplomacy have also been reduced. Huge cuts and reorganisation within the State Department and impending cuts in the foreign service all point to a worldview that does not believe in gentle coaxing but rather in transactional strong-arming.

It is also important to remember that the intellectual theorists who form the foundation of Trumpism in the US believe in the centrality of executive power. This means that they see the presidency rather than the State Department or diplomatic corps as the centre of American foreign policy and diplomacy. In keeping with this worldview, the recent agreements that Washington has struck with other countries on tariffs and other issues have all centred on the White House, often on the person of Trump himself.

The visit of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to the White House this week was an example of this. The mutual defence agreement between the US and Saudi Arabia was touted as Trump's brainchild. In some ways, Trump sees himself as a monarch — not very different from the Saudi prince.

> American interest in the region is not tied to any narrative that Modi may want to peddle.

If India had recognised this in May, it would have been spared many troubles. When Trump claimed credit for stopping the conflict between India and Pakistan, he was not just seeking egotistical satisfaction. He was also reiterating an entirely new way of envisioning the American presidency as the centre of American diplomacy. Instead of recognising this new top-down model as the framework of the new America, the Indian government has continued to believe that good relations with diplomats and bureaucrats would yield a moment of understanding between the US and India.

That moment has yet to come in the second Trump era. The new vision of the US presidency as the all-powerful executive is steadily being strengthened. It is a message that few countries can miss. The statements in this new congressional report indicate not only that Pakistan won the war but also that India lost diplomatically in failing to recognise the new structure of American diplomacy. ■

The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.
rafia.zakaria@gmail.com

BY EHSAN MALIK

Policy responses

PAKISTAN is passing through a period of subdued growth shaped by stringent policies under the ongoing IMF programme. The economy has slowed to 2.7 per cent growth, while poverty affects 44.7pc of the population and unemployment stands at 8pc. After a brief decline, inflation is rising again, with the CPI at 6.2pc in October — more than double the level two months earlier.

Despite controls on foreign exchange, imports grew by 13.9pc between July and September 2025, while exports fell by 3.8pc, widening the trade deficit by 33.8pc. The exit of several multinationals — though not all due to local factors — has dented investor confidence. More worryingly, existing investors remain hesitant to expand beyond sectors cushioned by state patronage. Over 70pc of profits of the KSE-100 during the first nine months of 2025 came from such protected sectors and state-owned enterprises. Of the 17 most profitable sectors, only five were export-oriented, revealing a narrow base.

Pakistan's export share of GDP has fallen from 16pc in the 1990s to just 10.4pc in FY2024, and some have stopped exporting value-added textiles. This erosion of competitiveness underscores the need for deeper structural reform rather than temporary relief measures.

While the government provides support to key industries, dissatisfaction in the business community persists. In response, the prime minister has established task forces to address investor concerns. Yet policy space remains limited by IMF conditionalities. Measures such as tax or energy tariff cuts could lift activity temporarily but risk widening fiscal and external deficits, fuelling inflation, and weakening the rupee. Premature easing would once again trigger Pakistan's familiar boom-bust cycle.

Pakistan's tax rates are among the highest and the tax regime the most distortionary in Asia, especially for the salaried class. Without a shift from tax collection to wealth creation, new investment will remain elusive.

Reforms reportedly under consideration could amount to Rs1.1 trillion in tax cuts. Proposals include lowering the corporate tax rate from 29pc to 25pc, reducing maximum individual and AOP rates from between 38pc and 49pc, to 25pc, abolishing the super tax, eliminating taxes on inter-corporate dividends, and cutting the sales tax from 18pc to 15pc. Phased over the next few years, these measures could improve Pakistan's investment climate — as would removal of the capital value tax, which has pushed local capital abroad.

Business leaders made two distinct sets of requests. Exporters sought a realistic exchange rate, duty-free imports under the Export Facilitation Scheme, and continuation of captive power generation where grid supply is unreliable. These are essential to restore competitiveness.

By contrast, import-substituting industries want protection maintained, citing high energy and operational costs. Conceptually, protection should follow comparative advantage, not lobbying strength. However, the government could adopt a phased approach: prioritising tariff reductions for sectors that supply inputs to exporters, while linking tariff cuts in non-export sectors to efficiency gains and lower costs. Still, this approach risks perpetuating an elite bias, benefiting protected industries at the expense of millions of consumers who face higher prices and fewer choices. Pakistan's weak anti-dumping regime also needs strengthening, especially as shifting global trade may divert surplus goods to Pakistan.

> Reform must also target structural bottlenecks.

Reassessing Pakistan's investment climate — amid both investor exits and renewed foreign interest, including from Saudi Arabia — is a positive step. Yet improving taxes, tariffs, or energy costs alone will not be enough. Reform must also target structural bottlenecks: simplifying regulations, creating special economic and export zones with affordable utilities, improving access to long-term capital, upgrading ports, roads, and logistics, protecting intellectual property, and investing in testing laboratories. Pakistan also needs to renegotiate trade agreements and facilitate profit remittances to reassure investors.

The focus should shift from market-seeking to investment that strengthens the current account. Sectors such as agriculture, tourism, mining, mineral processing, and exportable services deserve priority. Ensuring food security before exporting commodities is equally important. Policymakers should also desist from selling assets to foreign investors that yield no foreign currency revenue and lead to short payback periods due to Pakistan's risk profile.

Our challenge is not choosing between stabilisation and growth. It is making stability pro-growth. ■

The writer is the former CEO of Unilever Pakistan and the Pakistan Business Council.

FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1975 | Fifty years ago

Bahawalpur province

BAHAWALPUR: Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto today [Nov 21] reiterated that there was no question of making Bahawalpur a separate province. Talking to newsmen … he said the stand of his party had all along been clear… . He said he had never been in favour of a separate provincial status for Bahawalpur in the past. "We do not change our stands," he added. … Even before the general elections he refused to support this demand ... while other political parties were supporting a referendum. "Why should I", was his answer when … asked … if he would hold discussions with the Bahawalpur United Front. — News agencies

[Meanwhile, as reported by news agencies from Saigon,] Vietnam wrote a new chapter in its history by announcing that its two parts are to reunite after 21 years of separation, under an agreement reached here last night [Nov 20]. A conference on the reunification of North and South Vietnam ended in Saigon … with delegates from the two sides signing a document favouring an ultimate merger… . … Vietnam's reunification marks the end of an unnatural partition since 1954, when the Geneva Indo-China agreement put an end to French colonial rule.

1950 | Seventy-five years ago

Arab world

LAKE SUCCESS: Arab League Secretary-General, Abdul Rahman Azzam Pasha, in a statement … declared that "it must be clearly understood that Libya is a part of the Arab world". He urged the Libyan peoples "to sink their differences" so that they might in the near future achieve their goal and become a member of the Arab League and of the United Nations. "The support which Libya has received from the Arab and Muslim countries and from the friendly states of the East and Latin America is great victory for the Arab League," he said. "The United Nations Organisation has resolved that complete sovereignty and unity for Libya is indispensable to the peace of the Arab world, and to North Africa in particular.["]

Azzam Pasha reiterated that the future of Libya must be established on a democratic constitution. "In our view," he added, "this is only the beginning and it lies with the people of Libya to continue their efforts to achieve liberation and in complete liberty mould the status of Libya.

"Libya's internal affairs are the concern of the Libyan peoples themselves, but Libya's complete unity and final liberation is the concern of the Arab world." — News agencies

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@dawn.com

Letters may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All letters should carry the writer's address, CNIC and phone numbers.

Trump leading the world backwards

FOR more than 30 years, the world has avoided slipping back into the dangerous cycle of escalation that defined the Cold War era. After the superpowers realised how close they had come to nuclear catastrophe, they slowly built a system of restraint. Arms-control treaties, verification mechanisms, and a shared understanding of mutual destruction pushed nuclear testing into history. This long period of relative calm makes today's renewed talk of testing all the more worrying.

Against this backdrop, United States President Donald Trump's recent directive to Pentagon to explore new nuclear test possibilities appears historically tone-deaf and strategically short-sighted. It overlooks the hard-earned lessons of the Cold War. At the time, both the United States and the erstwhile Soviet Union believed that strength came from building bigger and more destructive weapons. But each new test only provoked another response, pushing both sides closer to the edge. It was a dangerous game where one misstep could have meant annihilation. The world eventually stepped back from the brink, not because of luck, but because leaders finally recognised that nuclear one-upmanship had no winners.

Today's world is far more complex than the bipolar Cold War order. Instead of two major powers, there is now a multipolar rivalry involving the US, China, Russia and several emerging nuclear states. Reintroducing nuclear tests in such an environment is like lighting a match in a room full of fuel barrels. There are more players, more tensions, and fewer rules. The old arms-control framework — the one that helped stabilise the Cold War — has weakened over the years. Key treaties have collapsed, verification has eroded, and trust among major powers is at its lowest point in decades.

In essence, bringing back a Cold War-era practice now risks replaying the darkest chapters of the 20th century, but this time without the safety nets that once kept competition in check. A single test by one country could trigger a chain reaction, pushing others to respond with tests of their own. Such a spiral would make diplomatic restraint harder, and strategic miscalculations more likely.

Supporters of new testing argue that it strengthens deterrence, but this argument ignores the fact that modern nuclear technology does not require explosive testing to remain credible. Instead, political signalling becomes the real motive — and that is precisely what makes the situation so dangerous. Using nuclear tests as symbols of power invites others to do the same. The world cannot afford to treat nuclear weapons as tools of political theatre. The lessons of history are clear: once the cycle of testing begins, it becomes difficult to stop. What kept the world safe for three decades was not louder threats, but quieter diplomacy and strong global norms. Reviving nuclear testing would not make any nation safer. It would simply drag the world back towards an era of fear — an era we worked so hard to leave behind.

Sanaullah Mirani
Daharki

Senior citizens

IN our part of the world, poeple are considered 'senior' after reaching the age of 60. When I was that age, I was fortunate to be in good health and I continued to remain active as I considered myself still far from joining the 'seniors club'. Now having touched 80, I was expecting and keenly looking forward to seeing some benefits. I am absolutely disappointed to see nothing coming in the way of support.

To start with, going to National Savings centres, one has to take a token and be seated (if a seat is available) and wait for hours for one's call. During a visit to my bank, I saw four counters — one for cheques/pay-orders, one for senior citizens, and two for general public. Only two counters were functional. When I enquired why the counter meant for senior citizens was closed, the reply by the official was funny: "We do not have many senior citizens accounts here."

Coming back from an overseas trip, I landed at the airport in Karachi early in the morning. There was too much rush. When I asked one official there, he told me that there were four flights, and only two counters for early-morning flights. When I requested him to help me as a senior citizen, his reply was hilarious: "All passengers are senior for us." He probably took senior as 'elite' and not senior in terms of age.

Seniors go through multiple health issues, including cataract, diabetes, etc. The fee of consultants and various laboratory tests are too high, and visits consume hours. Once I had to run from one section of the healthcare facility to the other to get the required treatment.

In contrast, my experience as a senior citizen outside Pakistan has been simply wonderful. On a visit to London, I remember, I and my wife got worried at Heathrow, watching a huge rush at immigration counters. All of a sudden, a young female immigration official came to us, took our passports and asked us to follow her. I was taken aback as to what happened and wondered where she was taking us. She took us to the counter and got our passports stamped immediately. When I thanked her, she said it was her duty to ensure the seniors were taken good care of.

We have been hearing for decades that the government is planing to introduce reforms to facilitate senior citizens. I hope the current government will take due steps to grant senior citizens some concession in taxes. I have paid taxes for over four decades while performing my professional duties, and now, I believe, it is time to get some benefits in return.

Akber D. Vazir
Karachi

Un-retirement trend

ONCE, retirement was considered the golden phase of life, a time to slow down, focus on family, and enjoy long-forgotten hobbies. However, this concept is rapidly changing. Across the world, many retirees are returning to the workforce, giving rise to a new and interesting trend known as un-retiring.

A recent survey in the United States revealed that 48 per cent of the retirees who had returned to work cited financial reasons, while 45pc said they did so for social and emotional satisfaction. Rising inflation, the high cost of living, and unstable markets have made it difficult for many to remain comfortably retired. At the same time, the rise of hybrid and remote job opportunities as well as work-from-home arrangements has made it easier for older adults to stay professionally active.

As American author Mark Walton aptly noted, "work, for many older adults, is no longer just about money, it is about meaning." This shift shows that the retirees of today are not only seeking income, but also some purpose, connection and mental engagement in their later years.

Muhammad Faizan Ali
Karachi

Health lexicon

IN Pakistan, anti-snake venom (ASV) is often described as a 'vaccine' even though it is actually a serum. This mix-up appears frequently in public reporting. Recent news reports about the proceedings of Sindh Assembly's Public Accounts Committee have used the term 'anti-snakebite vaccine', 'anti-snake venom vaccine' and 'ASV vaccine'. Technical sources, however, are being accurate. The National Institute of Health, for instance, lists 'anti-snake venom serum' and 'anti-rabies serum' separately from preventive vaccines, and provincial documents clearly use the term 'antivenom'. The key difference here is simple. While a vaccine protects before exposure, a serum is a treatment post-exposure.

According to the World Health Organisation, vaccines train the immune system in advance, as was seen during the Covid epidemic a few years ago.

On its part, a serum works very differently. ASV is a serum used after a bite and only in an emergency. The WHO explains that antivenom is made by immunising donor animals with venom, and then extracting antibodies that neutralise it inside the human body. The same mechanism applies to anti-rabies serum or rabies immunoglobulin. Simply put, serums give short-term protection after exposure, while vaccines build long-term immunity.

Understanding the difference between serum and vaccine is important becasue Pakistan already struggles with low health literacy. Many people do not have access to clear and simple medical information in the country. Terms like vaccine, serum, immunoglobulin or antivenom can be confusing for them. This confusion has the potential to affect behaviour, resulting in treatment delays and loss of trust in the healthcare system. Using correct terms is not a technical concern; it is a critical element in terms of public safety. Better wording supports public safety. Small improvements in how we communicate health terms can help people make safer decisions, and strengthen their trust in the national healthcare system.

Talib Haider
Karachi

▶ **COMBATTING MISINFORMATION:** Every day, countless fake stories, edited videos and misleading posts circulate on social media. Many young people, without verifying facts, forward such content and unknowingly spread confusion, hate and fear. Digital misinformation threatens not only social harmony, but also national stability. The core issue is not technology itself, but the lack of responsibility regarding its use. Schools and colleges should include digital literacy lessons that teach students how to verify sources and identify fake news. The government must remove false information quickly from all platforms. Most importantly, parents should guide their children to pause and think critically before believing or sharing anything online.
Iqra Bibi
Rawalpindi

▶ **ONGOING CHAOS:** The people of Karachi have been facing constant trouble due to the Red Line project on the University Road. Instead of easing the situation, the government has initiated yet another development plan under the umbrella of the K-IV project, and announced the closure of University Road for several weeks. The people are once again left with no proper alternate route or direction. These projects are meant to improve city's infrastructure, but is this the right way to do it? The situation reflects a complete failure on the part of the government in managing urban development while ensuring ease and safety for the people.
Muhammad Aaqib
Karachi

▶ **PALM TREES:** Increased plantation of non-native palm trees along roads and in housing societies throughout Lahore has set alarm bells ringing. Palm trees are not suitable for our environment; they dry our land and require excessive amounts of water. The government and municipal authorities should take effective and urgent land preservation measures and promote the plantation of native trees that have thrived in the land for thousands of years.
Muhammad Yazan Aamir
Lahore

External Ombudsman

Veteran journalist Muhammad Ali Siddiqi is *Dawn's* External Ombudsman (DEO). His duty is to attend to our readers' complaints, and to respond to them professionally. DEO is the investigating authority to whom all complaints can be referred, and it is DEO who takes notice of any alleged violations of *Dawn's* code of ethics, and informs the Editor for appropriate action.
Email: dawnombudsman@gmail.com